

Mayor suggests law to combat metal theft

By AP and Messenger staffs

The mayor of Columbus is proposing a new city law to address a problem that Athens County law enforcement officers say they face.

Frequent thefts of copper wire and other building materials that are then sold in a booming market for scrap metal have prompted the mayor to propose a city law that would force scrap dealers to require identification from their sellers.

Statewide, thieves have stolen car parts such as catalytic converters for platinum and other metals, aluminum siding from homes and even copper pipe from a Columbus church's air conditioners. Authorities say high prices for metal, driven by building booms in China and India, are enticing thieves.

Homes and businesses in Athens County have been hard hit.

"There are cases where homes are being built and (builders) return the next day to find that the copper wiring is totally stripped out of their home," Athens County Sheriff's Deputy Doug Crites told The Messenger for a recent article.

And it's not just residential construction sites that are being hit by thieves. Both the Hampton Inn and Holiday Inn Express construction sites in Athens were hit by copper thieves.

Mayor Michael Coleman has proposed an ordinance that would require scrap metal yards to get photo identification and possibly fingerprints from anyone who sells to them. Dealers also would have to agree to random inspections, report their daily transactions to police and hold onto what they buy for at least a week to see if someone reports it stolen.

The proposal is expected to go before City Council next month.

"If these people find out there's no place to sell, it would be less attractive for them to steal it," said Michael Weinman, the police department's legislative liaison.

Some copper stolen from Athens County ends up in Columbus, according to Crites.

"If we show up there (at a local salvage yard) and seize that property, they lose their money - it's their bread and butter," Crites said, which encourages dealers to "load it up in a truck and get it out of there quick and then take it to bigger operations in Columbus, for instance."